Full Length Research Paper

Academic writing challenges at Universities in Zimbabwe: A case study of great Zimbabwe University

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This paper reports on the findings of an inquiry into the nature of academic writing weaknesses inherent among first year undergraduate university students in Zimbabwe, using Great Zimbabwe University (GZU), as a case study. Five hundred and fifty students and fifteen lecturers constituted the sample. Document analysis, interviews and the questionnaire were used as data collecting instruments. Results were presented and discussed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The study revealed that first year undergraduate university students' written papers are riddled with a multiplicity of weaknesses, and suggests that students should view writing as different from speech and that they should treat writing as a process rather than a product. The paper also recommends that there be a paradigm shift in the teaching of academic writing at universities in Zimbabwe, from a study skills orientation to an academic literacies orientation. The paper further recommends an integrative approach to the teaching of writing at universities.

Key words: Academic writing, writing as a process, writing as a product, study skills orientation, academic literacies orientation.

INTRODUCTION

As lecturers in charge of communication skills across the Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) curriculum, the researchers are concerned about the students' generally weak academic writing. The researchers' aim is to have students who can produce stronger, clearer, more grammatically correct, more organized, cohesive and coherent essays that have well-cited sources and are well-referenced, especially after doing the academic writing aspect of the Communication Skills course. After doing the academic writing component, students are expected to put what they have learnt into practice as they write assignments in Communication Skills and other courses. The communication skills course at Great Zimbabwe University, apart from introducing students to the theory of communication, focuses on listening, speaking, reading, and writing itself. Writing contributes an undoubtedly high percentage to the learning that takes

place at any university. Adams et al. (1980) agree that formulating the study essay is but a very demanding exercise. A fluid and fluent discussion of a subject is arrived at through the analysis and synthesis of the information pertaining to the subject, that is, writers analyze the mass of material by breaking it down into smaller details relevant to the specified topic and synthesize or make general statements about these details (Adams et al., 1980). In academic writing, the analysis and synthesis tools lie in effective use and effective manipulation of language in writing.

Writing presents its unique demands on every student, especially when it is in a second language, as is the case with Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) students under study. Palmer in Mathews, Spratt and Dangerfield (1985) located the problems in foreign secondary school and adult English Language students' written work in two sites. It could be unfamiliarity with the language itself-especially lexical and grammatical errors or it could be attributable to the medium rather than the language, for example problems of organizing information, punctuation, and spelling. The researchers were interested in

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establishing the nature of academic writing weaknesses that Zimbabwean university students display during their first few weeks of entering university, why the weaknesses occur and what could be done to make their academic writing more successful.

Not only does writing enhance greater appreciation of any subject, it is also of much practical utility. White (1986: 18) says "because writing is a way of learning, you can actually achieve deeper insight into any subject by writing out your thoughts". Some Great Zimbabwe University lecturers have expressed concern that some students who participate quite eloquently in tutorials often perform disappointingly below expectations in written essays. This seems to confirm the view that oral fluency does not spontaneously translate into written fluency. Hardaway and Hardaway (1978) have also noted that people who have no difficulty talking often freeze when they have to write. The researchers believe that if these weaknesses in students' academic writing are systematically investigated, classified and their possible sources explained, the students would be more academically literate if they follow the recommendations made in this paper. Effective academic writing is crucial to every university student, since much of the assessment that goes on at university is based, not only on what information students present, but also on how that information is presented, in writing.

JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

Internationally, literature on academic writing abounds. Numerous studies have been carried out and papers written in the field of academic writing and the challenges it presents to students. Examples include Ballard and Clanchy (1988, 1991, 1997), Steinman (2003, 2005), Boughey (1998), Canagarajah (2002), Holmes (2004), Dysthe (2001), Connor (1996) and Tshotsho (2006). These studies have encouraged the researchers to investigate university students' academic writing in Zimbabwe, using Great Zimbabwe University as a case study. Academic writing problems faced by students vary from one country to another (Dysthe, 2001). Literacy is contextual and varies from one culture to another (Street, 2003), hence the researchers desire to investigate university academic writing in Zimbabwe, using GZU as a case study. More so, earlier studies (which are privy to these researchers) on writing in Zimbabwe have tended to focus on composition writing by learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). These include studies by Maposa (1992), Thondlana (1998), Ngwaru (2002) and Moyo (2003). It is the researchers' belief that university students' academic writing in Zimbabwe needs to be interrogated. The researchers were also compelled to carry out this inquiry by the ever-present demands for effective writing in all institutions of learning, not just in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, but the world over.

Moyo's (2003) study identified categories into which 'O' level students writing weaknesses fall. The researchers were curious to find out if, and to what extent, such weaknesses persist at university level. This is despite the fact that, for the majority of university students in Zimbabwe, English is used as a second language, but to enter university one should have passed 'O' level English Language. Furthermore, some students would have passed Advanced Level English Language and Communication Skills (General Paper). It is the researchers considered view that the results of this study can be generalized to all universities in Zimbabwe since, to some extent, students at these institutions share the same socio-cultural and educational backgrounds, where, for instance, English is the language of instruction but is a second language.

WRITING: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Because there are probably as many definitions of writing as there are authors on the subject, perhaps this complex activity may best be conceptualized, firstly by briefly differentiating it from speech, secondly, by viewing it as a process, thirdly, in terms of the skills which it (writing) entails, fourthly, as an aspect of academic socialization, and finally, as an aspect of academic literacy. While in speech, meaning can easily be enhanced by paralinguistic features like facial expressions, gestures, body movement, proximity and other suprasegmental features like voice, pitch and volume, tone, intonation, stress and pause (Palmer in Matthews et al., 1985) writing lacks these elements. For this reason, writing has to be well punctuated and more cohesive if it is to achieve its purpose. Hilton and Hyder (1992: 7) rightly observed:

"Writing requires greater precision and care than speech, as it is a more formal activity producing a permanent record. When we speak we gauge our listener's response and clarify any points, which haven't been comprehended. As no such interaction takes place in a piece of writing, our communication skills have to be unambiguous."

Hilton and Hyder (1992) go on to advocate clarity, conciseness, exactitude and appropriateness, if effectiveness is to be achieved in writing. Hardaway and Hardaway (1978: 9) sum this up thus: "Because writing is permanent, it should be better organized and easier to understand than speech." In his view of writing as a process, Nunan (1991) asserts that competent writers do not produce final texts at their first attempt, but that writing is a long and often painful process, in which the final text emerges through successive drafts. This is unlike the product view of writing in which emphasis is on correction and comments on finished products by

teachers of writing (Dysthe, 2001: 1). Effective writing, therefore, has to go through a series of stages, until a final, meaningful product, is produced. Tyner (1985), Collins and Kessien (2001), and Hedge (1983) agree that writing should go through processes of pre-writing (such as brainstorming), drafting, revising and proofreading. We find the latter two stages very important as they, among other things, ensure a fluent, linguistically competent piece of writing. In light of this, the researchers were interested in unearthing whether GZU first year students regard writing as a process or as a product, the latter view which is eschewed by Nunan for resulting in shoddy pieces of writing. A view of writing (an aspect of literacy) as a set of generalizable skills has been the dominant view in the last century (Dysthe, 2001) and is described by Street (2003) as an autonomous model of literacy, where writing skills are seen as neutral and universal, something akin to Paulo Freire's 'banking' model of education. Dysthe (2001) refers to this view as the study skills orientation to the teaching of writing. It is this orientation that informs the teaching of academic writing at GZU and other universities in Zimbabwe. In conceptualizing writing in terms of these discreet skills, Palmer in Matthews et al. (1985: 71) reminds us that writing is a special skill that does not spring naturally from an ability to speak a language. Palmer goes on to divide writing skills into graphical/visual, grammatical, expressive/stylistic, rhetorical and organizational skills.

Graphical/visual skills include the ability to spell words correctly, and Hilton and Hyder (1992) advise writers that knowledge of possible and probable spelling patterns is enhanced by sensible use of a dictionary. White (1986) also acknowledges the importance of the spelling skill in writing and asserts that steady practice will make you a better speller.

Also, included under graphical skills is the ability to punctuate one's written discourse correctly. In affirming the significance of punctuation in writing, Hardaway and Hardaway (1978: 47) pose the following pertinent questions to writers:

- Have you capitalized the beginnings of your sentences?
- Do you have question marks where they are necessary?
- Are any of your sentences run-ons or comma splices?
- Could you clarify the writing by using a semi-colon to join two independent clauses or a dash to separate a thought?

Format is also a visual skill and it includes such aspects as the layout of a letter, report, memorandum and other kinds of writing. Expressive or stylistic skills, according to Palmer in Matthews et al. (1985) referred to a writer's ability to express precise meanings in a variety of styles or registers, selected appropriate vocabulary, sentence patterns, and structures.

Rhetorical skills entail the writer's use of cohesive devices or linking devices or the ties, which make a piece of writing, "hang together". These include conjunctions, which Halliday and Hasan (1976) put into four categories, viz. additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. McGinley (1991) calls these devices connectives and groups them into those which show continuity (moreover, furthermore, in addition to); those which signal change of direction or focus (however, nevertheless, conversely, on the contrary, despite, in spite of, though), those signaling cause/effect (consequently, therefore, because), and the ones which showed that the writer is concluding (therefore, finally, hence, thus, lastly). White (1986) emphasizes the importance of organization and development in writing.

Organizational skills concern themselves with how information is organized into paragraphs and texts by sequencing ideas, rejecting irrelevant information and summarizing relevant points (Palmer in Matthews et al., 1985).

Thus, this study was interested in analyzing students' essays with focus on graphical, grammatical, rhetorical, organizational skills and others. From an academic socialization orientation, writing is seen as a tacit aspect of learning to be a member of the discourse society of a particular discipline (Dysthe, 2001). This view of writing eschews any teaching of writing, arguing that as students study, they spontaneously picked up writing, which is, learning to write by osmosis. Finally, from an academic literacies point of view, writing is seen as a complex, developing accomplishment which is closely tied to the character of each discipline and the knowledge claims made by each discipline (Dysthe, 2001).

Not only does writing vary from subject to subject, but it is also influenced by students' literacy contexts outside of school, as well as their personal, social and cultural experiences (Short and Cloud, 2006). Apparently, this is the same view, which Street (2003) shares in his ideological model of literacy, in which literacy is seen as being imbedded in social practices and is, therefore, contextual and situated.

New London Group (1996) also shares the same view. In view of this, the study will also briefly discuss students' writing from academic socialization, academic literacy, and ideological model perspective.

To sum up, writing could best be conceptualized by differentiating it from speech, by viewing it as a process rather than a product, by regarding it as a set of skills, by viewing it as an aspect of academic socialization, and, finally, by regarding it as a facet of academic literacy.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out over two semesters. Students of two different intakes, one beginning March, 2010 and another beginning August, 2010 from all the four faculties in the university, participated in the study.
Fifteen lecturers selected from all the four faculties also participated.

Population

All first year undergraduate students at GZU in 2010 and all lecturers who taught these students in various courses constituted the population for the study.

Sample

Five hundred and fifty (550) first year undergraduate students were purposively selected from the faculties of Arts, Education, Sciences and Commerce; on the basis of the students' studying the Communication Skills course. Fifteen (15) lecturers who taught these students were randomly selected from each of the four above-mentioned faculties and participated.

These lecturers were selected from the following disciplines: History, English, Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, Marketing, Economics, Social Studies, Religious and Moral Education, Curriculum Theory, Environmental Science and four from Communication Skills.

Data collection

Data were collected through document analysis, questionnaire and interviews.

Document analysis

One thousand one hundred (1100) essays written as first and second assignments by five hundred and fifty (550) students in the Communication Skills course were analyzed by the four Communication Skills lecturers who carried out this study. The aim was to gain insights into the nature of the students' academic writing weaknesses.

In each essay, the researchers' focus was on graphical, grammatical, rhetorical, organizational and other skills falling outside these categories, such as tenses, parts of speech, clarity, and citation of sources and referencing. The essays were written in English, which is the language of instruction in Zimbabwe.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was personally delivered to each of the five hundred and fifty students.

A total of five hundred students completed and returned the questionnaire. A close-ended questionnaire was used because it is relatively less time consuming to complete and makes quantification of data comparatively easy.

This instrument had six questions which solicited for information on whether students plan their essays, whether they write more than one draft, whether they edit their essays, whether they consult dictionaries for spellings and word meanings, whether they feel confident in their ability to express their ideas in writing and whether they discuss their writing with others. The degree of responses on the questionnaire ranged from ALWAYS to NEVER.

Interviews

Fifteen lecturers who were offering courses to first year undergraduate students were interviewed so as to find out their perceptions of the students' academic writing. Each interview lasted about twenty minutes.

The interviews were audio taped and then transcribed by the researchers.

Common themes were identified and noted down.

Findings

Findings from document analysis

An analysis of the students' essays revealed that numerous aberrations made students' academic writing weak. Table 1 shows the major categories of weaknesses observed in the students' essays, the frequency of recurrence of each weakness, examples and the frequencies expressed as a percentage of the weakness corpus. Table 1 shows that students had problems with spelling (19.0%). Students' essays also revealed general confusion of homophones and misuse of parts of speech (15.5%). Also, evident was lack of subject-verb agreement (concordial agreement) in students' written academic pieces (15.4%). Poor punctuation, especially that involving separation of ideas and of complete sentences was evident (11.6%). Students' weaknesses in the use of prepositions accounted for 8.7% of the weaknesses noted. Students' weak word division skills caused some of them to either fuse separate words or to split words (6.8%). Failure to cite sources and an arbitrary choice of attributive verbs (5.6%), failure to achieve cohesion through inability to use connectives or through using in appropriate ones (5.3%), and use of wrong tenses or inadvertent tense shifts (3.2%) were further weaknesses noted. Other weaknesses involved wordiness which often resulted in tautology or redundancy (2.8%), inconsistent and wrong pronoun reference that distorted meaning (1.9%), weak paragraphing where entirely different ideas could be mixed in one paragraph or alternatively having undeveloped single sentence paragraphs (1.8%), and the use of articles where none are necessary or the use of the wrong articles altogether (1.4%). The last weakness noted, but by no means least important, is that of ambiguity (1.1%). The above percentages are quite significant in that they show that the students' academic writing challenges are varied because each class is represented.

Therefore, lecturers of Communication Skills, together with all other lecturers, should draw their students' attention to such writing challenges so that the students could improve and produce better pieces of writing. However, it is rather the overall effect of these weaknesses on students' essays than the percentage recurrence of individual weaknesses that impacted on the quality of the students' academic writing. For example, while poor spelling was the most frequent weakness, followed by confusion of key parts of speech, lack of agreement, poor punctuation and so on, and while ambiguity was the least recurring weakness followed by wrong use of articles, weaknesses in paragraphing and so on, all these weaknesses taken together made students' academic writing weak. Academic writing

Table 1. Major academic writing weaknesses.

Category of weakness	Frequency (n)	Frequency (%)	Examples
Spellings	5462	19.0	Continous, reciever, amoung, occured, auther, langauge, mantain, arguement, intresting, convinient.
Parts of speech and diction	4449	15.5	The essay looks at the extend to which…This does not save any meaningful purpose. The sender expects a responds. Students need to accept advise
Agreement/concord	4427	15.4	Gestures play a crucial role in verbal communication. Taylor (1998) defines communication as…Everybody communicate on a daily basis. The speaker has to use body language to enhance meaning.
Punctuation	3341	11.6	Reading involves extracting meaning out of a text; it does not involve merely moving one's across a page. There are a number of reading skills these include skimming and scanning.
Prepositions	2506	8.7	This essay discusses about the assertion that… On this paper I will focus on… Some students fail to cope up with their academic demands.
Word division	1940	6.8	Infact, not all communication is two way. Inspite of that…One should take notes inorder to…
Citation of sources and referencing	1601	5.6	Carey, J.W. (1992) argues that Michael (1993) defines…John Fiske sees communication as…
Connectives/discourse markers	1515	5.3	Fielding (1993) views communication as a transaction whereby people create meaning. However, this is supported by Dimbleby (1992). Some theorists view communication as a one-way and some view it differently.
Tenses	908	3.2	When an essay has been written, it should be revised. After assignments had been marked, they are given back to students. Once a message is send, feedback is expected.
Wordiness	814	2.8	To sum it up, it can be concluded that…According to Gupta (2004) he defines…However, be that as it may no communication is perfect.
Pronouns	556	1.9	When one wants to send a message, you should encode it properly. Students' success in their studies depends on how one makes his notes

Table 1. Contd.

Paragraphing	503	1.8	Either long uncontrolled paragraphs or undeveloped single sentence paragraphs.
Articles	398	1.4	When a sender sends information…Well organized notes should have the heading. Some students do not see a need for consulting their tutors.
Ambiguity	310	1.1	Noise is anything, which hinders communication, and we must strive to improve it.
Total	28730	100	

challenges, therefore, cannot be solved overnight but through conscious, consistent and persistent practice over time.

Findings from interviews

The assorted responses from interviews with 15 lecturers tended to agree in many ways. There was nearly 100% agreement in the following responses:

1. Students struggle with their writing, especially lack of clarity, uncertain or ambiguous expressions that obscure meaning.
2. Students' answers show weaknesses that indicate inadequate planning and carelessness on the part of students. Such weaknesses range from misspellings, tense errors, confusion of lexical items to poor citation and referencing.
3. Students' answers lack cohesion and sustained development as evidenced by weak/inappropriate use of connectives/discourse markers or by their entire absence, resulting in answers that lack emphasis, contrast or a balanced discussion.

One participant had this to say, "Some of my students' essays are presented in muddled writing, ideas picked and dropped here and there without logical development and answers presented in hurriedly and carelessly arranged language structures some of which lack concordial agreement. Imagine also, a university student confusing 'their' for 'there' and not being able to check his/her spelling of basic vocabulary items. Really, I sometimes have to grope for meaning".

Of the lecturers interviewed, 100% acknowledged that their emphasis had been on semester course content coverage and presentations and thus basic writing was taken for granted, since submission of coursework is a pre-requisite. They also expressed that by the time they are through with marking of the first assignments, students' second assignments would normally be due and therefore it becomes difficult to attend to individual writing problems. Twelve lecturers, that is, 80% suggested that students should be assisted in the following manner: encouraging peer correction before submission, thoroughly revising their (many) drafts, consulting dictionaries and having constant practice. Their feelings and views can be summarized in the words of one of the participants: "We should urge our students to treat writing more seriously. Their writing could improve if it was well planned, written and revised for errors before the draft for submission is written again, much more carefully. Students should be in a position to scrutinize their assignments from a third person's point of view or invite a friend to check on the errors before passing these on to lecturers. I also call upon Communication Skills lecturers to devote more time to teaching these students writing skills. The importance of these skills to the students cannot really be overemphasized. Our national high school system seems to churn out raw products, raw in the sense of inability to produce cohesive and coherent pieces of written discourse…" Three lecturers (20%) blamed semesterised learning as placing undue pressure on the students who find that time may never be sufficient for them to thoroughly revise their written pieces.

Findings from questionnaire

Table 2 shows the questionnaire administered to the students and the number of respondents per each degree of response. Table 2 shows that the majority of students never plan their work (58%), never write more than one draft (67.8%), never edit their essays (78%), never consult dictionaries (72%) never discuss their writing with other students (73.4%) and feel confident in their ability to express ideas in writing (74.8). A minority

Table 2. Summary of findings from questionnaire.

Item	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Do you plan your essays?	44	63	103	290
Do you write more than one draft of an essay?	41	48	72	339
Do you edit your essays?	23	33	54	390
Do you consult a dictionary to check/confirm word meanings and spelling?	20	25	95	360
Do you discuss your writing with other students?	18	26	89	367
Do you feel confident in your ability to express your ideas in writing?	374	84	25	17

revealed that they always plan their work (8.8%), always write more than one draft (8.2%) always edit their essays (4.6%), always consult dictionaries to check or confirm spellings and word meanings (4.0%) always discuss their writing with others (3.6%) and never feel confident in their ability (3.4%). This scenario could be the explanation for the inherent weaknesses in the students' essays, as supported by our findings from document analysis (Table 3) and interviews with lecturers. It is evident that the majority of students viewed writing as a product rather than a process (Nunan, 1991) since they never bother to plan their essays, write successive drafts and edit them (Clanchy and Ballard, 1981; Tyner, 1985; Hilton and Hyder, 1992; Barker and Westrup, 2000). Students also appear to have unbridled confidence in their writing skills (74.8%) and this could explain why the majority do not plan their essays, do not write several drafts, do not edit their essays, do not refer to the dictionary and do not discuss their essays with other students all of which lead to poor and ineffective writing in the end. All this suggests that Communication Skills lecturers have the task of advising all their students that in order for them to improve in academic writing, they need to change their attitude to it and improve their writing habits.

DISCUSSION

Findings from document analysis and interviews have shown that students' academic writing, though not totally incoherent, is weak. Results from the questionnaire administered to students suggest some of the reasons for the weaknesses. If we are to use the assessment scale used to allocate students into bands of academic writing proficiency in a study carried out at Curtin University, Australia (http://www.cbs.curtin.edu.au/files/cbsstaffpublications/Assessing_the_English_literacyskills_of_a_group_of_first_year_ business_students.doc.) the majority of our students have proved to be either poor or modest communicators, with only a few falling into the competent communicator category. In that study carried out at Curtin University, poor communicators in written English were seen as those whose academic writing shows such major weaknesses in grammar, structure and vocabulary, that

clarity is hindered.

The student is able to express very basic ideas in writing and is likely to have difficulty in coping with writing for academic contexts and related fields. The modest communicator was described as one who shows some weaknesses in grammar, structure, and vocabulary. Such a student is unable to express complex ideas and uses simple sentences to convey meaning. The student is likely to require support so as to communicate adequately in academic contexts and related fields. The competent communicator, on the other hand, was described as one who can express ideas clearly despite occasional grammatical, structural and vocabulary errors. The student employs mostly simple and some complex sentences to convey meaning, and should communicate adequately in academic contexts and related fields. While this study has established that the majority of GZU first-year undergraduate students fall into the poor communicator and modest communicator categories, the Curtin university study revealed that most students at that university fell into the modest communicator and competent communicator categories. This confirms the view that literacy, and indeed academic literacy, is contextual and varies from country to country (Dysthe, 2001; Hull and Schultz, 2002; Short and Cloud, 2006; Street, 2003). This GZU study's findings, however, compare well with Holmes' (2004) experience with first year students at the University of Asmara, Eritrea, where even after two semesters of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme, the majority of students still found it difficult to write fluently and to use academic norms of quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing from different sources. Also, students found it difficult to join ideas from source materials with their own ideas. This study's findings also agree with Tshotsho's (2006) observation regarding black South African students, in which they face an additional difficulty in writing when they have to deal with writing in English, an unfamiliar language. Tshotsho (2006) explores the black South African students' challenges in achieving cohesion and coherence, challenges also faced by GZU students.

The weaknesses in GZU students' academic writing could be attributed to several factors. In the first place, for the majority of students at GZU, English is a second language. Although, in Zimbabwe English is the medium

Table 3. A list of commonly misspelt words observed in students' essays.

Misspelt words	For	Misspelt word	For
Writter	Writer	Summery	Summary
Writting	Writing	Employement	Employment
Acompany	Accompany	Enviroment	Environment
Nortion	Notion	Goverment	Government
Neccessary	Necessary	Committe	Committee
Suturday	Saturday	Que	Queue
Intertainment	Entertainment	Amoung	Among
Truency	Truancy	Surburb	Suburb
Continous	Continuous	Favourate	Favourite
Concious	Conscious	Exagerate	Exaggerate
Comunication	Communication	Adress	Address
Queitly	Quietly	Theirfore	Therefore
Existance	Existence	Proffession	Profession
Recieve(r)	Receive(r)	Dissagree	Disagree
Surbodinates	Subordinates	Acurate	Accurate
Exprience	Experience	Avaliable	Available
Scholars	Scholars	Onother	Another
Repeatition	Repetition	Also	Also
Helpfull	Helpful	Deliever	Deliver
Easly	Easily	Harpharzard	Haphazard
Berauccracy	Bureaucracy	Interprete	Interpret
Defination	Definition	Dinning	Dining
Definately	Definitely	Occured	Occurred
Suprising	Surprising	Previledge	Privilege
Tittle	Title	Completily	Completely
Auther	Author	Accomodation	Accommodation
Omited	Omitted	Concerntrate	Concentrate
Potrays	Portrays	Vice verser	Vice versa
Increament	Increment	Convinient	Convenient
Students	Students	Begginning	Beginning
Hirachy	Hierarchy	Greatful	Grateful
Langauge	Language	Truelly	Truly
Listerning	Listening	Tactiful	Tactful
Mantain	Maintain	Occassion	Occasion
Arround	Around	Intension	Intention
Sorround	Surround	Particulary	Particularly
Harrassment	Harassment	Dissapoint	Disappoint
Condusive	Conducive	Bussiness	Business
Emenates	Emanates	Arguement	Argument
Intresting	Interesting	Seperate	Separate
Examplary	Exemplary	Transimission	Transmission
Schoolars	Scholars	Intergrate	Integrate

of instruction from Grade Three, at home students revert to their L1 and, therefore, they cannot be expected to be proficient in English, even at university level. To make matters worse, sometimes their L1 interferes with English and sometimes students tend to over generalize L2 rules and semantic features, resulting in students' interlanguage, the separateness of a second language learners system, a system that has a structural intermediate status between the native and target languages (Brown, 1987: 169). It is the researchers' contention that if GZU students' academic writing were to be in the students' first languages, it would be more fluent, since, according to Todd in Kennedy (1984: 165), to the student, the mother tongue is the system of

meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.

Secondly, the weaknesses could be attributed to the medium of writing itself. For meaning to be achieved in writing, there is need for clarity, precision, care, conciseness, and appropriateness (Hilton and Hyder, 1992), imperatives that can only be achieved through accurate spelling (Hilton and Hyder, 1992), punctuation (Hardaway and Hardaway, 1978), expression (Palmer in Matthews et al., 1985: 71), and accurate use of linking devices (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Writing, therefore, places heavy demands on the student who, if he or she has to come up with a coherent piece of academic writing, should treat writing as a process (Nunan, 1991; Ballard and Clanchy, 1981; Tyner, 1985; Hilton and Hyder, 1992; Barker and Westrup, 2000). This is not always easy, since, on entering university, students find themselves inundated with work that is not only greater in volume but that is also more difficult than they had been used to at high school (Machakanja et al., 1999; Moyo, 2001). The GZU students themselves revealed that they do not take writing as a process, since the majority said that they do not plan their work, never write more than one draft and never edit their work (results from questionnaire).

Thirdly, there is the issue of the students' unbridled and indeed surprising confidence in their writing (74.8%). This could also explain why the majority do not plan their essays, do not write several drafts, do not edit their essays, do not refer to the dictionary and do not discuss their essays with peers. Perhaps this confidence originates from the students' awareness that they have passed 'O' Level English Language and (for some) 'A' Level English Language and Communication Skills (General Paper). Yet writing at high school and writing at university are, if not worlds apart, significantly different. First year university students, among other challenges, encounter a new disciplinary epistemology and they are required to discuss competing literary theories and harness evidence to support one or the other (Dysthe, 2001: 10). Finally, perhaps GZU students' academic writing problems are exacerbated by the study skills orientation (Dysthe, 2001) of the Communication Skills course offered at the university (and all other universities in Zimbabwe), in which all the students are taught the same writing skills, irrespective of the students' personal, social, cultural experiences as well as their subjects of specialization. As stated earlier on, academic literacy varies from subject to subject and takes into cognizance students' backgrounds. In an attempt to address GZU students' academic writing challenges, the researchers have encouraged the students to treat academic writing as a process and have encouraged collaborative writing before each student writes his or her final draft. The researchers also intend to revise the GZU Communication Skills curriculum so that it caters for the needs of students in different areas of specialization. Furthermore, the researchers intend to do further research with another group after it has completed the Communication Skills course so as to assess the effectiveness the above suggestions.

Limitation of the study

The researchers would like to acknowledge that they studied the students' essays as a homogenous group, notwithstanding their different ages, gender, home backgrounds and different subjects they study at the university, factors which could contribute to their different competencies in academic writing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has emerged, from this case study, that first year undergraduate students at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) and presumably at other universities in Zimbabwe displayed a myriad of weaknesses in their academic writing. These features or characteristics (Steinman, 2005) were observed in the students' essays and corroborated by the researchers findings from interviews with lecturers. Findings from the questionnaire instrument also suggest that the students take the writing process for granted, hence the multiple weaknesses in their academic writing.

The researchers do not wish to dismiss the students' academic writing as illogical, incoherent, irrelevant (Ballard and Clanchy, 1992) or disorganized (Steinman, 2003) because of the need to "appreciate hybridity of texts, and accents in writing" (Steinman, 2005: 15), and because competence cannot be absolute. It is relative to specific contexts, communities and practices (Kern and Schultz, 2005). However, without holding an excessively prescriptive view of what is acceptable in academic writing (Steinman, 2005: 2), the researchers make the following recommendations to universities in Zimbabwe, lecturers and students.

To universities, the researchers recommend that the Communication Skills course should be offered for at least two semesters, as this study has established that one semester tends to leave the students raw. The teaching of academic writing should feature prominently in the Communication Skills course. The researchers, therefore, reject the view of writing as academic socialization, in which writing disappears, that is, students are supposed to pick it up merely by studying their different disciplines, without it (writing) being taught (Dysthe, 2001).

Furthermore, it is our contention that the important task of developing students writing skills should not be left to Communication Skills lecturers alone. Rather, all

lecturers across the university curriculum should make a concerted effort towards improving these skills, not only during the students first year but until students have completed their courses. Dysthe (2001) recommends a new crop of teachers (lecturers) who are proficient in their disciplines and who can also teach writing.

The researchers are inclined to agree with her. "At the universities today teaching a subject is not enough. University teachers will increasingly be expected to integrate writing into their courses as part of the general trend towards students' active teaching" (Dysthe, 2001: 11).

The researchers also view the following as the most critical aspects of academic writing which should be given prominence in the Communication Skills course: grammar, punctuation, paragraphing, spelling, linking devices, diction/word choice, citing of sources and referencing. Correct grammar should not be regarded as the icing on the cake but as part of the cake itself (Burton, 1984). Inaccuracy at the surface level of one's essay invites criticisms from the reader (Clanchy and Ballard, 1981).

Sense in a piece of writing is aided by correct punctuation marks (Hilton and Hyder, 1992). Paragraphs act as signposts, which tell readers that a new idea is being introduced and developed. They (paragraphs) also lend order and structure to a piece of writing (Hilton and Hyder, 1992). Good spellings create confidence, impress the reader and show efficient management of words (Burton and Humphries, 1992). Linking devices create cohesion and coherence in writing (Oliu et al., 1992). Successful writing requires a large and varied vocabulary or diction (Hilton and Hyder, 1992). Any academic writing worth its salt needs to have the views of different authorities, which views should be acknowledged to avoid plagiarism, hence the necessity for students to be guided on how to quote from books, journals, magazines, periodicals and other sources, and how to reference.

The researchers would also like to urge university students to be always cognizant of the fact that writing is different from speech, so it demands precision, care, clarity, conciseness, exactitude, organization, appropriateness and punctuation (Hardaway and Hardaway, 1978; Palmer in Matthews et al., 1985; Hilton and Hyder, 1992). Also, students need to conceptualize writing as a process (Nunan, 1991), which should go through stages of prewriting, drafting redrafting, revising and proof reading/editing (Clanchy and Ballard, 1981; Tyner, 1985; Hilton and Hyder, 1992; Barker and Westrup, 2002). The editing activity could be enhanced if done collaboratively with peers. It is also the researchers view that there be a paradigm shift to the teaching of writing at GZU and other universities in Zimbabwe, from an autonomous model of literacy (Street, 2003) or study skills orientation (Dysthe, 2001) to an ideological model (Street, 2003) or academic literacies orientation (Dysthe, 2001). The latter view of writing is more recent thinking, which takes into cognizance students' identities, that is, their socio-cultural backgrounds as well as their disciplines.

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APPENDIX

A sample of the major writing weaknesses observed in students' essays

Confusion of homophones and key parts of speech/wrong choice of diction

1. If there are well-organized, notes will benefit the student.
2. The sender of a message expects a responds.
3. Sometimes they may arise noise.
4. Conclusively, communication can be said to be an on-going process.
5. To conclude this bulleting, communication can never be perfect.
6. Beside this, there is also the issue of …
7. In industry, interviews are made for new employees.
8. Weather writing is a process …
9. I will go on to cite examples.
10. A principle weakness of this approach lies in …
11. When human beings come into conduct with each other …
12. This does not save any meaningful purpose.
13. This essay examines to what extend …
14. This can be a result of one's guilt conscious.
15. New students need advice for them to adopt to university life.
16. Before presenting a speech, one needs a lot of practice.

Lack of subject-verb agreement

1. Gestures play a crucial role in reinforcing verbal communication.
2. Diskettes become unreliable once they are infected.
3. Book et al. (1980) defines communication as a two-way process.
4. The speaker has to use gestures to enhance meaning.
5. The lecturer marks the assignments and writes comments.
6. The sender and receiver exchanges roles.
7. The family plays an important role in socialization.
8. Everybody communicate on a daily basis.
9. The reader just skims through the page.
10. In tutorials, students discusses with their lecturers.

Poor punctuation

1. Reading involves extracting meaning out of a text, it does not merely involve running one's eyes across the text, there are many types of reading, these include skimming and scanning, when you skim you do so for gist and when you scan you are looking for specific information.

2. Note-taking and note-making are important processes to the student there is really not much difference between the two but some authors say note-taking involves listening and note-making involves reading notes are written in brief they are easy to understand, if one is revising for exams he can refer to his notes they are also less bulky and so they are convenient to carry.
3. There are many steps which must be followed when you are writing an essay, firstly you must do brainstorming, this involves jotting down point as they come to mind.

Weaknesses in use of prepositions

1. One may look the other into the eye to stress a point.
2. Lecturers put on notices on notice boards
3. Communication takes place from a day to day basis.
4. If you do not understand, you seek for clarification.
5. When students first come at campus, they move above without any knowledge on where to go.
6. Teachers frown to bad behavior.
7. Students discuss about how to tackle given assignments.
8. At social life students interact in groups.
9. On this paper, I will consider the assertion that …
10. A student who is accompanied with a friend …
11. Students who lack reading skills may not cope up with academic work.

Fusion of words

Inorder for in order
Ontop   for   on top
Inturn   for   in turn
Infact   for   in fact
Inspite of   for   in spite of
Inneed of   for   in need of

Weak citation of sources

Students fail to correctly cite sources in their essays, mainly through:

1. Omission of year in which source was published
2. Omission of page reference where student has made a direct quotation from a
3. Source
4. Inability to use varied and appropriate attributive verbs
5. Giving a page reference in indirect quotations
6. Giving book titles in essays
7. Including authors' first names or initials within essays
8. Omissions of some words in direct quotations, or adding their own words.

Weak use of connectives/discourse markers

1. Some theorists view communication as a one-way process and some see it as a two way process.
2. First impression counts a lot thus one should be presentable when attending an interview.
3. There are many definitions of communication but all seem to agree that there must be a sender, a   message and a receiver.
4. I have discussed several reading skills. However, a student can benefit a lot from these skills.
5. In spite of shortage of books, students write poor assignments.
6. Although, a summary is a condensed piece of writing, it is written in fewer words than the original.

Weaknesses in use of tenses

1. When a message is send …
2. This will also enables the student to revise his or her notes.
3. The sender sends a message, and he will expect feedback.
4. When an essay has been written, it should be revised.
5. When assignments had been marked, they are given back to students.

Wordiness

1. If we look at Gray (1960) he is talking about reading as a very vitally important skill. Gray says when you read there is what he calls reading the lines …
2. Looking at dressing, it can tell a lot …
3. Looking at the situation like at the institutions like for example the university …
4. The presenter will respond by answering the asked questions
5. In my point of view, I suggest …
6. In the same manner or similarly, the students themselves, interact in groups as they discuss about assignments
7. Although, there is no feedback, but the message has been decoded.
8. To sum up, it can be concluded that …
9. Non verbal cues include gestures, facial expression and also body movement.
10. Human beings have been communicating since from time immemorial.

Inconsistent and wrong pronoun reference

1. When one is sending a message, you can tell from facial expressions what she is actually saying
2. When a husband has sent a message to her wife, the wife also sends his response and they are received by the husband
3. Gestures made by the hand may enhance meaning if it is accompanies speech
4. Students' success in their studies depends on how one makes his notes.

Poor paragraphing

Students tend to mix very different ideas in one paragraph, instead of having a single idea and its supporting details in a paragraph. Also evident in students' essays are undeveloped, single sentence paragraphs, resulting in what D'Angelo (1980: 390) calls "writing that is over differentiated, in which there seem to be too many paragraph divisions and in which the basis of paragraph divisions seems to be almost arbitrary, or at least non-logical". The other extreme is where our students produce "under differentiated" writing, in which there are very few or no paragraph divisions.

Misuse of articles

1. When a sender sends information, he (sic) expects feedback,
2. Well-organized notes should have the heading,
3. When a lecturer is delivering the information, students take notes,
4. Some students do not see a need to consult their lecturers,
5. A few students should be given an advice on how to study.